

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An information and redemption system comprising:

a merchant;

a plurality of participating patrons; and

a clearinghouse;

wherein each participating patron has supplied an e-mail address for use by said clearinghouse;

wherein said clearinghouse provides electronic communications including information or promotional offers about said merchant to a subset of said participating patrons; and

wherein said electronic communications can be redeemed or responded to by said participating patrons

2. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein a unique patron identification code is associated with each of said participating patrons and a unique merchant code is associated with each said merchant.

3. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said clearinghouse facilitates the exchange of patron information between different merchants.

4. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said electronic communication sent to said subset of said participating patrons by said clearinghouse contains content and personalization based on the participating patron's profile information.

5. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said participating patrons are given offers exclusive to said participating patrons.

6. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein there are a plurality of merchants, and said clearinghouse matches a subset of said merchants with a subset of said participating patrons based on the likelihood of mutual merchant and patron interest.

7. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein a participating patron is entered into a database associated with said clearinghouse upon receipt of an e-mail address by said clearinghouse, and said e-mail address being verified through the sending of a test electronic communication to said participating patron and the success of said test electronic communication being confirmed within said database.

8. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein least one of said electronic communications includes a hyperlink such that when a participating patron clicks on said hyperlink, the patron is directed to a web site page associated with said hyperlink.

9. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said clearinghouse matches said participating patrons with a communication to prepare a personalized communication for each said subset of said participating patrons, said personalized communication being sent by electronic mail to said participating patrons.

10. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said system generates tracking reports to monitor at least one of the number of said participating patrons, new enrollments, participant patron comments, new enrollment

referrals, new patron profiles, and the general effectiveness of a particular electronic communication.

11. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said electronic communications are part of an ongoing two-way process between said participating patrons and said merchant.

12. An information redemption system as recited in claim 1, wherein said electronic communications are sent out based on at least two of the following criteria: a periodic basis, as the result of special events, or as a result of information contained in said patron profile of said participating patron.

13. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 2, wherein said merchant has a plurality of locations, each location is given a location identification code unique for that merchant.

14. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 2, wherein a participating patron is given an identification device including a form of said unique patron identification code and said merchant has a unit that is able to communicate with said identification device and store information regarding a visit by the patron to said merchant when said participating patron activates said unit with said identification device.

15. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 14, wherein a participating patron is given an identification device including a form of said unique patron identification code and said identification code may be used with multiple merchants affiliated with said clearinghouse.

16. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 14, wherein said unit includes a merchant interface such that said merchant may enter information relating to a transaction involving said participating patron.

17. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 16 wherein said unit is a physical unit with a plurality of buttons, least one of said buttons reflecting a redemption offer, said button being activated in association with said identification device to associate said patron with said redemption offer.

18. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 14, wherein data in said unit is communicated to said clearinghouse on a periodic basis using one of a manual transfer of information and a direct electronic connection.

19. An information and redemption system comprising:

a merchant, a unique merchant code associated with said merchant;

a plurality of patrons, a unique patron code associated with each of said patrons;

and

a clearinghouse;

wherein each patron participating in the system has supplied an e-mail address to either said merchant or said clearinghouse;

wherein said clearinghouse provides e-mail communications including information or promotional offers about said merchant to a subset of said patrons, said clearinghouse utilizing a profile associated with said patrons to create said subset;

wherein said e-mail communications can be redeemed by said patrons or said patrons can respond by sending a new e-mail communication to either said merchant or said clearinghouse; and

wherein said merchant has a unit that is able to communicate with said identification device and store information regarding a visit by said patron to said merchant when said patron activates said unit with said identification device.

20. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 19, wherein there are a plurality of merchants, said clearinghouse matching a subset of said merchants with said participating patrons based upon mutual merchant and patron interest.

21. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 19, wherein least one of said communications includes a hyperlink such that when a patron clicks on said hyperlink, it is directed to a web site page associated with said hyperlink.

22. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 19, wherein said communications are sent out on a periodic basis, as the result of special events, or as a result of information contained in said patron profile of said participating patron.

23. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 19, wherein a participating patron is given an identification device including a form of said unique patron identification code and said identification code may be used with multiple merchants affiliated with said clearinghouse.

24. An information and redemption system as recited in claim 19, wherein said system generates tracking reports to monitor the number of said participating patrons, the number of new participating patrons, patron comments, referrals from participating patrons, patron profiles, and the general success of said merchant's use of said system.

25. A method for developing an affinity relationship between a merchant and participating patrons comprising of:

electronically maintaining a profile for each participating patron that each said participating patron can read and modify;

maintaining a database tracking patron behavior and communication with respect to said merchant;

sending targeted and personalized electronic communications to a subset of said participating patrons based on said patron profile; and

allowing each recipient of said electronic communication to redeem said electronic communications or send a reply to said merchant.

26. A method as recited in claim 25, wherein a unique patron identification code is used to identify said patron in said database.

27. A method as recited in claim 25, wherein a unique merchant identification code is used to identify said merchant in said database.

28. A method as recited in claim 27, wherein a merchant location number unique to that merchant is used to identify each location of said merchant in said database if said merchant has more than one location.

29. A method as recited in claim 25, wherein said merchant can exchange information relating to their patrons with other said merchants through the use of a clearinghouse.